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**Title:**

Time to reclassification: How long does it take English language learners in seven Washington districts to develop English proficiency?

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## **Abstract Body**

### **Background/Context:**

How long does it typically take English language learners (ELLs) to develop proficiency in English? This is an important question for educators working with ELLs, not least because English proficiency is linked to academic success in other content areas (Halle, Hair, Wandner, McNamara, & Chien, 2012; Kieffer, 2011). For most ELLs, the language of instruction is English, regardless of subject area, and therefore students who have not reached proficiency in English struggle to learn grade-level content, take longer to graduate, and graduate at much lower rates than their English-proficient peers (Callahan, 2013; Gwynne, Pareja, Ehrlich, & Allensworth, 2012; Kim, 2011).

Knowing the typical time it takes ELLs to develop English proficiency provides educators with a measure of expected progress and may help districts identify students who are struggling to reach proficiency. This knowledge may also help educators identify programs and practices that facilitate or delay the development of English proficiency.

Most research on time to proficiency has relied on students' reclassification from ELL to former ELL. Since every state has its own criteria for reclassification, it is difficult to compare results across states. Previous studies have shown that program models, initial proficiency level, gender, special education program participation, home language, and U.S.- versus foreign-born status appear to be related to English learner student performance and time to reclassification (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Pérez, 2008; Conger, 2009; Conger, Hatch, McKinney, Atwell, & Lamb, 2012; Cook, Boals, Wilmes, & Santos, 2008; Hakuta et al., 2000; Slama, 2014; Shneyderman & Froman, 2012; Thompson, 2015; Umansky & Reardon, 2014).

### **Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:**

This study provides a basis for understanding how long it typically takes ELLs in seven Washington school districts to achieve reclassification as former ELLs. This study looked at ELLs' grade level and English proficiency at school entry, as well as their gender, home language, race/ethnicity, special education status, and country of birth.

The study addresses three research questions:

1. What was the average time taken by ELLs to achieve reclassification?
2. What was the rate of reclassification by 2012/13 among English learner student?
3. How do time to reclassification and rate of reclassification vary by:
  - Grade level and English proficiency at entry into district schools?
  - Student characteristics of gender, home language, race/ethnicity, special education status, and country of birth?

Students who left the districts, graduated, or dropped out of school without being reclassified were excluded from this study.

### **Setting:**

Washington state has seen substantial growth in the number of ELLs. In 2012/13 the seven study districts enrolled 14 percent of Washington's K–12 students and 22 percent of its ELLs. In the

same year, 54 percent of current ELLs in these districts failed to graduate on time, compared with 24 percent of all Washington students and 28 percent of all students in the districts (Came & Ireland, 2013; Community Center for Education Results, 2013).

**Population/Participants/Subjects:**

The study population included 17,733 current and former ELLs who were members of eight cohorts that attended schools in the seven districts between kindergarten and grade 5. Data collection ended in 2012/13 and includes at least 6 years and up to 13 years of data, including classification dates and student-level demographic and individual characteristics for each cohort. These students were very diverse population, and spoke a total of 167 different languages, although 80 percent spoke one of 13 languages.

**Intervention/Program/Practice:**

In Washington all school districts share the same classification criteria for ELLs, which is a student's score on a Washington English proficiency assessment. These assessments are administered to all students whose parents indicate on the Washington Home Language Survey that the students speak a language other than English at home and to students whom teachers believe may be limited in English proficiency. There are four levels of proficiency:

- Beginning and advanced beginning (level 1).
- Intermediate (level 2).
- Advanced (level 3).
- Transitional (level 4).

Students who score at the first three levels (beginning through advanced) are classified as ELLs and are eligible for ELL services. Students are assessed annually until they reach the transitional level, at which point they are officially reclassified as former ELLs and are no longer eligible for services.

**Research Design:**

The study used descriptive statistics to calculate the mean number of years it takes ELLs who were members of the eight study cohorts to achieve reclassification as former ELLs and the percentage of cohort members who were reclassified by 2012/13.

**Data Collection and Analysis:**

The study used data from two K–12 Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data sets for school years 2005/06 through 2012/13, which included data on student-level demographic and individual characteristics for 2000/01–2012/13, such as classification dates, gender, home language, and race/ethnicity.

The time to achieve reclassification was calculated by combining data from the eight cohorts and averaging the number of years between identification as an ELL and reclassification as a former ELL. These results were disaggregated by student gender, home language, race/ethnicity, special education status, and country of birth. The rate of reclassification was calculated by dividing the number of English learner student cohort members who achieved reclassification by 2012/13 by the total number of current and former ELLs in the eight cohorts.

**Findings / Results:**

It took an average of 3.8 years to achieve reclassification as former ELLs for the 82 percent of ELLs who were reclassified by or before the end of the study period. Of these, about 8 percent achieved reclassification after one year, 28 percent were cumulatively reclassified after two years, 49 percent after three years, and 62 percent after four years of being identified as an English learner student (figure 1). Eighty-two percent of the 17,733 ELLs were reclassified as former ELLs by 2012/13. The remaining 18 percent were still enrolled in a district school and were still considered ELLs in 2012/13, the final year of this study.

It took an average of 3.2 years to achieve reclassification for ELLs who entered a district school in kindergarten. A total of 85 percent achieved reclassification by 2012/13 (table 1). ELLs who entered a district school in grade 1 took longer, 3.8 years on average, to achieve reclassification and had a similar reclassification rate (84 percent). Students who entered in grades 2–5 took an average of 4.3 years to achieve reclassification. The rate of reclassification decreased as the grade at which students entered school increased, from 85 percent for kindergarten entry to 72 percent for entry at grade 5.

ELLs who entered kindergarten with advanced English proficiency took fewer years than their less proficient peers to achieve reclassification. On average, students who entered kindergarten with advanced proficiency and achieved reclassification by 2012/13 did so in 2.5 years, and those who entered with basic English proficiency took 4.5 years to achieve reclassification (table 2).

Unexpectedly, this trend is reversed for students who entered in grades 2–5. ELLs who entered a district elementary school for the first time in grade 5 with advanced English proficiency achieved reclassification in an average of 4.4 years, compared with 3.1 years for students who entered in grade 5 with basic English proficiency (see table 2). This finding is counterintuitive and contradicts what has been observed by other researchers, who found that a higher initial English proficiency reduces the amount of time it takes students to reach grade-level proficiency (Cook et al., 2008; Shneyderman & Froman, 2012).

Other study findings include:

- Girls took slightly less time than boys to achieve reclassification as former English learner students. On average, girls were reclassified in 3.6 years, while boys took 4.0 years.
- Speakers of Arabic, Amharic, and Korean took less time than average to achieve reclassification; speakers of Samoan and Spanish took longer.
- Hispanic students took slightly longer, 4.2 years on average, to achieve reclassification than other groups, while Asians took less time (3.4 years) than other racial/ethnic groups.
- Students eligible for in special education took an average of 5.5 years to achieve reclassification, compared with 3.7 years for students in general education.
- English learner students born in the United States took less time (3.3 years) to achieve reclassification than foreign-born students (3.5 years) if they entered a district schools in kindergarten but took longer if they entered in grades 1–5 (for example, 4.8 years for U.S.-born and 3.7 years for foreign-born English learner students entering in grade 5).

**Conclusions:**

Many of the findings in this study corroborate the findings in the literature. However, some of the findings are counter to what has been reported by other researchers. In this study, ELLs who entered a district school in grades 2–5 with basic English proficiency took fewer years to achieve reclassification than those who entered with advanced proficiency. In previous studies, students who entered a school with high English proficiency achieved reclassification in less time than those who entered with lower proficiency (Cook et al., 2008; Shneyderman & Froman, 2012).

The authors collaborated closely with district administrators and teaching staff around the study design, data display, and implications of the findings. We were especially interested in why they thought that ELLs with basic English proficiency who entered their schools in grades 2–5 achieved reclassification faster than those who entered with advanced proficiency. These administrators suggested only one explanation, which is plausible though unverified, that advanced ELLs in grades 2–5 receive much less instructional support than ELLs in kindergarten and less advanced ELLs in grades 2–5. Therefore, a new student with advanced English proficiency entering a district elementary school in grades 2–5 will not receive as much direct English language development instructional support as a student entering in kindergarten or with a basic knowledge of English. This lack of direct support and knowledge of English grammar and phonics may explain why older students with intermediate and advanced English proficiency take so long to be reclassified.

The authors and school districts are continuing their collaboration, and have worked together to design a follow up study using survival analysis, a regression model to control for differences between student characteristics, account for censored data, and nest students in schools. Also, authors have worked closely with school districts to disseminate the results in easily understood format for parents, and to translate the results to Spanish.

## Appendices

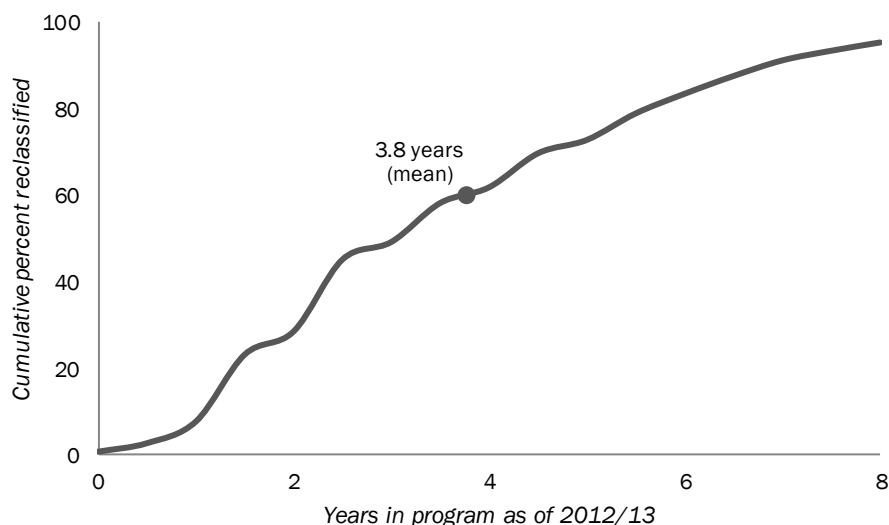
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## Appendix B. Tables and Figures

**Figure 1. It took almost four years for ELLs to achieve reclassification as former ELLs**



*Note:* Datasets are for school years 2005/06–2012/13 and include information student grades, years in program, and reclassification for 2000/01–2012/13. The data include only students who were reclassified by 2012/13.

*Source:* Author’s analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data for 2005/06–2012/13.

**Table 1. ELLs who entered district schools in kindergarten achieved reclassification as former ELLs in fewer years and at a greater rate than those who entered in grades 1–5**

Grade at entry	Total number of students	Mean to reclassification	Rate of reclassification (percent)
Kindergarten	6,944	3.2	85
1	2,987	3.8	84
2	2,017	4.4	83
3	2,039	4.5	81
4	1,927	4.2	76
5	1,819	4.0	72
All students	17,733	3.8	82

*Note:* Datasets are for school years 2005/06–2012/13 and include information on student grades, years in program, and reclassification for 2000/01–2012/13. The data include only students who were reclassified by 2012/13.

*Source:* Author’s analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data for 2005/06–2012/13



**Table 2. ELLs with advanced English proficiency took less time to achieve reclassification than those with lower proficiency if they entered district schools in kindergarten, but took more time if they entered in grades 2–5 (mean years to reclassification)**

Grade at entry	English proficiency at entry			All proficiency levels
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	
Kindergarten	4.5	3.7	2.5	3.2
1	3.7	4.2	3.6	3.8
2	3.8	4.7	4.4	4.4
3	3.2	4.3	4.7	4.5
4	3.0	4.0	4.6	4.2
5	3.1	3.6	4.4	4.0
All students	3.6	3.9	3.7	3.8

*Note: Datasets are for school years 2005/06–2012/13 and include information on student grades, English proficiency level, years in program, and reclassification for 2000/01–2012/13. The data include only students who were reclassified by 2012/13.*

*Source: Author’s analysis based on Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data for 2005/06–2012/13.*